

VZCZCXRO9479
RR RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH
DE RUEHHI #0448/01 1090407
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 180407Z APR 08 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7644
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH 4605
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0049
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 000448

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: Unexpected Progress on Catholic Church Land Issues

REFS: A. HANOI 0278; B. HANOI 0442

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1. (SBU) Summary: In an unexpected move, central Quang Tri Provincial authorities announced a Government of Vietnam (GVN) decision to return the La Vang property to the Catholic Church following meetings in late March and early April between GVN authorities and the Catholic Episcopal Council of Vietnam. The La Vang church and pilgrimage center is one of three "priority properties" the Catholic Church has formally requested the GVN return and a significant Catholic pilgrimage site in Vietnam. The two sides also discussed a resolution to the ongoing property dispute over the former Vatican residence in Hanoi (Ref. A). With the return of the La Vang property and an ongoing dialogue with the GVN on the former Vatican residence, the Catholic Church continues to inch closer to solving its major property disputes with the GVN. Nevertheless, other Catholic property disputes, including an ongoing demonstration at Thai Ha parish in Hanoi (Ref. B), remain unresolved. End summary.

La Vang Church, Quang Tri Province

2. (SBU) According to Father Thomas Thuy, an administrator in the Hanoi Archbishop's Office, the GVN made the decision to return the long-disputed land in central Quang Tri province following a meeting on March 20, between Vice Minister of Public Security Nguyen Van Huong and the President of the Episcopal Council of Vietnam, Dalat Bishop Nguyen Van Nhon, at which they reportedly discussed the return of the land in Quang Tri, as well as developments regarding the Papal nuncio land issue in Hanoi. (Note. The La Vang property is one of three "priority properties" the Catholic Church has formally requested the GVN return to the Episcopal Council; the other two are the former Papal Nuncio in Hanoi and the Pius X Pontifical Institute in Dalat. End Note.)

3. (SBU) On April 10, provincial authorities met with leaders of the Hue Archdiocese (which covers Quang Tri) and announced that they would return 20 hectares of land (out of a total of approximately 23 hectares) to the Archdiocese. Previously belonging to a parish church dedicated to "Our Mary of La Vang" before 1975, the land was confiscated by the GVN after 1975. While a church was built to replace the one destroyed during the war and several private residences have been built on the site, most of the property has remained largely unused ever since. At a March 20 meeting, Bishop Nhon told MPS Vice Minister Huong that the Church would be willing to help with compensation for households on the 20 hectares that would need to be resettled as part of the handover. Catholic sources confirm that the GVN and the Catholic Church also agreed that the remaining 2-3 hectares, now housing several local Government buildings, would eventually be returned to the Catholic Church at a later date.

4. (SBU) The process of actually handing over the land is still

subject to detailed discussions between the Catholic Church and the Quang Tri provincial authorities. Bishop Nhon reported that the Church plans to upgrade the site and build additional facilities, turning the current "Our Mary of La Vang" Pilgrimage Center into a national Catholic pilgrimage complex. Separately, Church officials expressed some concern to POL staff that discussions with provincial authorities on compensation rates and other technical aspects may be lengthy and complicated, delaying the date of an actual turnover.

Former Vatican Residence, Hanoi

15. (SBU) The ongoing issue of the former Vatican residence was also discussed during the March 20 meeting (Ref A.). Bishop Nhon reportedly refused Vice Minister Huong's proposal that the GVN provide the Church with a new plot of land in exchange for the land currently occupied by the former Vatican residence. "Vietnamese bishops will not compromise when it comes to the Papal Nuncio issue. They are willing to compensate for the construction that has been built on the site through the years, and that's about it," Father Thuy of the Hanoi Archbishop's office asserted. (Note: There are several buildings on the site, including a restaurant, now closed, and a community center with a swimming pool and dance hall. End note.)

16. (SBU) Father Thuy went on to say that the Church leadership believes that the GVN decision to return the land in Quang Tri was designed to ease the flow of numerous formal requests to reclaim Catholic properties in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and elsewhere. The GVN decision would also send a message to the Holy See about the GVN's willingness to address pending issues of interest to the Catholic Church in Vietnam, in advance of a Vatican delegation that is expected to visit Vietnam in June 2008 to conduct regular bilateral meetings with the GVN. However, Father Thuy acknowledged that the Vatican delegation would likely not formally raise the

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Vietnamese Catholic Church's request to claim back its major properties with the GVN during the talks.

17. (SBU) Father Thuy went on to note that in recent years the Catholic Church has not made its disagreements with the GVN public, understanding that the GVN prefers to keep these issues out of the spotlight. However, it appears that the Church's patience with the GVN's lack of responsiveness has begun to run out. Father Thuy asserted that by making the pending requests publicly known, the Catholic hierarchy believes it is now putting justified pressure on the GVN to take action on claims, instead of just ignoring them.

Comment: Progress on Property Issue, More to Come

18. (SBU) With the pending return of the La Vang property and an ongoing dialogue with the GVN on the former Vatican residence, the Catholic Church continues to inch closer to solving its major property disputes with the GVN. The GVN is likely betting that approval of the return of the La Vang property will stem the flow of Church property claim requests. However, as the Church gains success in getting property returned, and brings more of its concerns into public, more parishes are now jumping on the bandwagon and pushing the GVN for the return of disputed property. Whether the GVN could now backtrack remains to be seen. The decision to return the La Vang property may buy the GVN some breathing room, but the issue of disputed Church property is now one that will not be ignored for long.

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